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A C C O U N T

OF THE

PROCEEDINGS OF A MEETING

OF THE

INHABITANTS of WESTMINSTER, *R*

IN PALACE-YARD,

MONDAY, Nov. 26, 1795.

INCLUDING

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SPEECHES

OF

The Duke of BEDFORD, Mr. SHERIDAN, Mr. FOX,

&c. &c.

WITH THE

PETITION to the HOUSE of COMMONS.

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ACCOUNT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF A
MEETING

OF THE
INHABITANTS of WESTMINSTER.

PALACE-YARD, Nov. 26, 1795.

IN the memory of the oldest inhabitant of the city, there never were assembled, upon any occasion, so immense a body of the people as yesterday met, in compliance with the requisition signed by JOHN GREGORY, Esq. It would be vain to attempt to give an estimate of the number, since it must be a mere effort of conjecture.

The hustings were erected in Westminster-Hall, early in the morning, so as to be pretty nearly finished before the Courts met, and without giving them any interruption whatever. When Mr. Fox arrived at the King's Arms Tavern, he mentioned that he had notes from the Chancellor and the Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, in answer to notes which he had written to them, upon the subject of having the meeting in Westminster-Hall: those notes signified a disapprobation of holding the meeting where the Courts were sitting.

By this time Lord Hood, Lord Belgrave, Mr. Ryder, and Mr. Jenkinson, were arrived, and upon the hust-

tings. A friend of Mr. Fox's went to those gentlemen, to signify that it would be adviseable, in consequence of what the Chancellor and Chief Justice had said, to remove the hustings to Palace-yard, but that particular care should be taken to accommodate them and their friends. General Tarleton then announced the removing of the hustings and the cause of it; and in little more than an hour they were erected in the front of the King's Arms Tavern, with every possible accommodation.

Mr. Fox, accompanied by the Duke of Bedford, the Earls of Derby and Lauderdale, Lord Robert Spencer, Mr. Sheridan, and a number of his friends, ascended the hustings; and Lord Hood, Lord Belgrave, Mr. Ryder, and his friends did the same.

The Right Honourable CHARLES JAMES FOX was unanimously called to the Chair.

Mr. Fox then came forward, and was received by the loudest acclamations of the people. "A daring attempt (said he) has been made upon your liberties—an attempt to subvert the Constitution of England. Bills have been brought into both Houses of Parliament; one under the title of the better securing his Majesty's Person; another for preventing seditious Meetings and Assemblies. These Bills, in effect, are intended to complete the overthrow of the Liberties of the People of England, to debase the character of Englishmen, and to put them on a footing with those who know not what the Rights of Man are, and among whom Freedom is entirely unknown. In a word, the Bill of Rights is proposed to be finally repealed; that you shall be deprived of the right of Petitioning. It is true indeed, as you are told, you may petition Parliament; but how are you to petition? With the approbation of a Magistrate you may petition; without it you cannot. If such a meeting as this is attempted to be held, and any person should be standing where you observe me, and endeavouring to explain to you the object, a Magistrate may come, and say that the proceeding seems to him to be dangerous; he may dissolve the Meeting; and if you persist in being together, he may put you under military execution.—By another provision, if a Magistrate suspects that

any meeting is to be held for the discussion of any political subject, and you pay money for your admission, he may attend, and he is to have power to disperse you, under the penalty of rioting in a disorderly house. Thus are the People of England forbidden expressly from discussing the conduct of their rulers. Ministers have involved you in an unnecessary War, which they have conducted to the disgrace of the British Arms; for which they have heavily loaded you with Taxes.—To this condition have they brought you. What could they have done more, but to forbid you to complain! They have attempted it.—Conscious of their own demerits, they think they cannot be safe, unless they can finally forbid you to state your own grievances.

The pretext of these Bills is, that the law as it now stands is insufficient to punish those who have been guilty of intercepting and insulting his Majesty in his passage to Parliament. I hope, that although that is not, in strictness, the object of this Meeting, you will nevertheless express, before you separate, your abhorrence of those disgraceful acts by which his Majesty was insulted—acts which we all equally detest, and all equally lament. This has been used as a pretext for these Bills, which are intended to deprive you of all your freedom; but it is the policy of bad men to join, whenever they can, their bad measures with the name of the Sovereign whom we all love, and are equally bound and determined to protect. But I am sure that, because we have the worst of Ministers, that shall not prevent you from declaring we have the best of Sovereigns. I have now nothing more to do but to take the Chair at this Meeting, and to conduct myself with impartiality.

This speech being heard with profound attention, was followed by loud and reiterated tokens of the most sincere and heartfelt satisfaction.

The Duke of BEDFORD then came forward, and was received, like Mr. Fox, with the most distinguishing marks of the affection of the people. When the applause had subsided, the Noble Duke addressed the company to the following effect:

On what you have heard, it will not be necessary for me to trouble you at great length. However, I shall say a few words on the measures which I shall propose to you to adopt, in consequence of the two Bills which have been so well explained to you by Mr. Fox. I must call to your recollection the transactions which have given rise to them. I am sure you must feel, as I do, the utmost horror at the outrage which was offered to his Majesty, and I am sure that you would join with me in using your utmost endeavours to bring to punishment those who have been guilty of that atrocious act; I am sure you would join with me in assenting to any Act that would better secure the safety of our Sovereign; but, thank God, the law is sufficient for that purpose. But while we are thus lamenting the outrage that was offered to his Majesty, and while Ministers are affecting so much alarm upon it, they themselves are committing a still more daring outrage against the Liberties of the People and the most valuable parts of our Constitution.

Two Bills have been brought into Parliament, both of them avowedly for extending the Criminal Laws, at a time when every other nation is diminishing it. These Bills likewise enact new punishments for misdemeanour—barbarous punishments, never before heard of in England; and at the same time this is expressed in such ambiguous words, as to enable the minister to punish us, whenever he pleases, for our opinions. The other Bill goes still further, for it strikes immediately at the very root of our liberties, and the most valuable part of our constitution. I say it strikes at our constitution, for it strikes at the very rights which you are now exercising, for, if that Bill was passed, a magistrate might declare that he was of opinion this was a seditious meeting, and it would be in his power to arrest me for speaking to you, and dissolve the meeting. If, conscious of the purity of your intention, you should attempt to debate afterwards, he would have power to subject you to all the horrors of military execution. In opposition to these odious principles, I say you have a right to meet; you have a right to petition; you have a right to remon-

strate against all public measures that appear to you to be injurious to your interests. It is an undeniable and a sacred right, transmitted to you by your ancestors; by them claimed, demanded, and insisted upon, and solemnly assented to from the throne itself, and, in the most formal manner, acknowledged as undeniable rights.

You have heard Ministers rail at innovations whenever any attempts has been made to prevent abuses. You now see, on the part of these very Ministers themselves, not an attempt at a Reformation, but a direct attempt at a Revolution—a direct, daring attempt to destroy the very essence of the constitution of England: for what will become of the fabric if the foundation be destroyed? In what manner, then, are we to resist this barefaced attempt to deprive us of our rights? I say, by exerting with energy the right of petition, while it yet remains, and which, by exercising, you will give to the rest of the country a good example. You should shew by your resistance that you abominate the law, which has for its object the destruction of your liberty. Do it firmly.—Do it collectively.—Do it calmly, but do it decidedly; and then will you shew those bold invaders of your liberties, that you will not submit to them; then will you make the leader of this attack upon your freedom shake, while he is surrounded by his own satellites. You will make him see you feel these attacks on your inviolable rights—Rights so interwoven with our constitution, that if it be criminal in him to invade, it would be doubly criminal in you to resign them. I shall therefore propose to you a Petition to the House of Commons, and an Address to his Majesty; but, as I feel myself exhausted, I shall desire a friend of mine to read them to you.

This address was followed by the warmest and lasting applause.

Mr. GREY then read the petition, which was highly approved of by the People, and which is to the following effect. It was seconded by Mr. HARRY HOUSE, the Father of Westminster.

The Humble PETITION, &c. &c.

SHEWETH,

That a Bill has been brought into your Honourable House subversive of the Liberties which the People of this kingdom, at the period when they transferred the Crown of England to the illustrious family upon the Throne, did claim, demand, and insist upon as their true, ancient, and indubitable rights.

That the said Bill is entitled "An Act for the more effectually preventing Seditious Meetings and Assemblies."

That the only mode by which your Petitioners and the People of Great Britain can express their sentiments, and make their grievances known, is by meeting together, either to instruct their Representatives, to petition Parliament, or to address the King. This is their Privilege, and subject to the existing laws, which have already provided against the abuse of it: Your Petitioners do, in the language of their forefathers, claim, demand, and insist upon the free exercise of it, as their true, ancient, and indubitable right. The allowance and encouragement of free, honest, and open discussion of all matters, Political and Judicial, while it has afforded the surest controul upon the encroachments of the Executive Government, has tended most effectually to secure the upright administration of justice.

Your Honourable House is humbly reminded, that the right of the People to such measures is the best security they possess against the abuse of power. If they who are delegated to defend their Liberties, basely or corruptly betray them; if they who are sent to watch over Ministers become their accomplices, what may the People do if they may not remonstrate?

By the Bill now depending, no Meeting can be called except with a knowledge of a Magistrate, whose presence is made necessary, not merely for the preservation of the peace, but for the purpose of controlling the sentiments to be uttered. He is constituted sole judge of the manner in which a grievance may be stated, or a right asserted. To differ with him in political opinion is made a breach of the peace; to maintain that opinion is made a riot; and to persist in it is to incur the horrors of military execution. We trust your Honourable House will feel proper degree of resentment against the principle of such a Bill, as affecting the whole mass of the People, but we, as inhabitants of Westminster, stand more especially in need of your protection. It is our peculiar fate to be superintended by Magistrates who are selected, employed, and paid during pleasure by the Executive Power.

Your Petitioners further beg leave to call the attention of your honourable House to a Bill now depending, entitled, "An Act for the Safety and Preservation of his Majesty's Person and Government against Treasonable and Seditious Practices and Attempts."

They humbly represent, that this Bill contains an arbitrary accumulation of treasons, calculated to harass and oppress the subject, without adding any security to the person of his Majesty; that it also describes the misdemeanour at which another of its clauses is pointed with such studied ambiguity as to comprehend in its penal operation every exercise of the right of examining public affairs, and that this misdemeanour so described is subjected to a barbarous punishment, which, as applied to such offence, is utterly unknown to the mild and merciful spirit of the law of England.

Under all these circumstances, your Petitioners, deeply impressed with a sense of the dangers which impend over the Peace and Constitution of their Country, most earnestly implore your Honourable House to avert them, by the rejection of measures which, by depriving the People of their most ancient and indubitable rights, have a tendency to alienate their affections from the Constitution, and to lessen their respect for the Laws.

Lord Hood then came forward, and on his signifying a desire to be heard, the people were silent.

His Lordship proceeded. The substance of his address (as far as we could collect what he said, for he spoke in a low tone of voice, and indistinctly) was, that he thought great misrepresentations of the Bill had gone abroad. That as one of the Representatives of the city of Westminster, he must protest against any determination which the present meeting might come to upon the subject of a Petition in the name of the inhabitants of the city of Westminster, because he could not consider any meeting entitled to that name that was not composed of those only who were the real Electors of that city, ascertained by the books of the different parishes. He thought that the only way to know the real sentiments of the inhabitants of Westminster would be that of taking the sense of the people in every individual parish, and to add his address to his name.

There were some marks of disapprobation after this address, but they subsided soon.

Mr. Sheridan then came forward and was most cordially received. He proceeded as follows:

There is no event that could justify the intentions of the present meeting more than the very patient hearing which you have been so generous as to give to the noble Lord who has just addressed you; nor could any thing have contributed more to the disappointment of your enemies than the decorum you have observed; because they want to reproach you with a spirit of tumult and of riot, and to say, Here is no impartiality, for here are not to be heard those who have a desire to collect the votes of the virtuous part of the people. I say, by your demeanour you have defeated their endeavours to sow discontent among you; for after the extraordinary manner you have listened to a speech the most extraordinary that ever was delivered to so large a body of the people, and that too by a noble Lord who pretends to be concerned for your interests, you have proved yourselves worthy of what your oppressors are endeavouring to deprive you, namely, a right to meet and express your sentiments on public affairs.

The noble Lord says he came not to argue here, but to protest against the meeting. This is a sample of what you are to expect hereafter. It is lucky that the Bill has not passed; for if it had, the noble Lord would not have protested against the meeting, he would have been here to knock you down. He says he does not know who are, and who are not inhabitants of the city of Westminster. I understand the noble Lord: he means, he cannot get the sense of the people of Westminster without a scrutiny. I know the court influence that will be introduced, and the terror that will be employed against any tradesman who shall dare to put his name against the sentiments of the noble Lord. Another circumstance worth attending to is this—that, according to the process which his Lordship recommends, you will have nothing to do when you meet; for, before the noble Lord shall have been satisfied of the sense of the inhabitants of Westminster the Bill will have passed: for I remember that in the progress of the last enquiry

which the noble Lord instituted, the Parliament was nearly over before there was an end of the scrutiny.

With regard to the Bills themselves, after what has been said by Mr. Fox and the Duke of Bedford, it would be superfluous in me to say much; indeed, any comment on them, to any man who has heard of them, or who has heard the spirit of them, would be an insult to his understanding. You have understandings, and it requires nothing but common-sense and common-feeling to hold in execration the Bills and the authors of them. The pretence of the Bills is to prevent the government of this country from coming into hatred and contempt. If they had their true title they would have been called "Bills to bring the government of England into hatred and contempt." The pretence for all these measures has been the outrage (which we all deplore) that was offered to his Majesty in his way to parliament. But is there one man here who believes that was the origin of these Bills?—No! No! they have been long prepared. Ministers waited for a pretence to introduce a system of slavery. If there had not been one, I know they are incapable of making one. The truth is, the people of England are too loyal and patient for the Minister's purposes, and this they were obliged to confess on the first day of the present session of parliament. His Majesty tells us from the throne that the people are submissive to the law—and so they are; for although they have just escaped from famine, and now they have the prospect of another, still they are submissive to the law. The Minister pretends to say he will provide them with corn; but now, instead of giving them bread, he endeavours to close up their mouths by terror.

There are persons whose interest it is to promote tumult and sedition, and that is a fund for spies and informers; for if there were not something of that sort to talk of, they would not live. Sedition is their prey, perjury their practice, and bribes and promises their wages! Spies and informers—Oh! No, I beg pardon; they are no more than *Ministerial Reporters for the defence of Government*. I have no doubt that we have here at this moment a pretty tolerable sprinkling of them. I wish them to report faithfully.

fully the proceedings of this day. The result will be this, that by this meeting two things are clear—that they can never succeed in attempting to make an English Jury contemptible, and Spies reputable.

Another thing which is very important to Westminster which I wish to observe is this: Our Magistrates are not as they are in other places—for they are dependant on the government. I do not mean to reflect on any body of men. Some of them may be respectable; others I do not know much of, and desire to know no more; but we have a right to regard them with constitutional jealousy; if a meeting is held of the inhabitants of Westminster, they will judge of you according to the character given of you by the Minister, who is their employer; of course his Worship will never come among you but with a guard of soldiers. They will come to put you to military execution, and when they have gone through their good service, they will go with their bayonets washed in the blood of their countrymen, to receive their wages at the Treasury.

I have only one word more, which is indeed unnecessary—it is to request you to conduct yourselves with decorum, and when the business of the meeting is over, to separate peaceably, and to shew that large assemblies of the people can be peaceable. You will respect the law for your own honour and for your own safety; and I will add that I believe, bold as it is now to assert it, the day will come, when the law, weak as it is said to be at present, will be found strong enough to bring to the scaffold your corrupt oppressors.

This speech was followed by prodigious applause.

Mr. Fox. I have nothing to add but congratulations to this assembly and to the country at large, and to observe that there are, at least in Westminster, some who know their rights, and who are determined by peaceable means to defend them. This I am sure, and from your knowledge of me you cannot doubt it, I am ready to obey your commands, and to second all your efforts to obtain your rights.

The time has been, when part of my conduct has not been equally agreeable to the majority of my constituents;

but when that was the case, did I endeavour to prevent popular meetings? I shall add no more than to repeat to you, that the spirit of the Bills I have mentioned to you is to prevent all popular discussion whatever; this right is not a part only, but may be said to be the very foundation, and the corner-stone of our constitution. I shall now proceed to put the Petition to the vote.

The question being put, for those who agreed to the Petition to hold up their hands—the whole company in a mass immediately held up their hands.

Mr. Fox observed, that from the number of persons who approved of the Petition he thought there could be but very few against it. However it was fair to put the question on the other side, which he did, by desiring those who were against it to hold up their hands.

Mr. Fox said the Petition was carried, and only two dissentient persons in the whole assembly.

This declaration was followed by long and lasting applause.

The Duke of Bedford came again forward, and proceeded nearly as follows:

Having already addressed you on a Petition which you have now adopted, it is unnecessary for me to say any thing further than that your conduct is particularly gratifying to me. What I am now going to offer I hope will be agreed to, even without the dissent of the two unfortunate individuals who opposed the Petition. I shall here, without any further observation, propose an Address to his Majesty.

Here the noble Duke read an Address to his Majesty, congratulating his Majesty on his escape, and expressing the abhorrence of the assembly at the outrage which had been offered to him, &c.

Mr. Fox put the question, that this Address be presented to his Majesty, which was carried without a dissenting voice.

The Duke of Bedford proposed that the Address be presented to his Majesty, and the Petition be presented to the House of Commons, by Mr. Fox.

The company agreed to this unanimously, and pretty vehemently insisted that Lord Hood should have nothing to do with the Address.

Mr. Fox came forward again, and said—It would ill become me to express by many words my thanks for your favours, and the confidence you repose in me. I hope I shall faithfully execute your commands. I am sure his Majesty will receive your sentiments of attachment to him with his usual graciousness; but I must tell you plainly, that when I come to present your Petition to the House of Commons, strange as it may seem to you, I will venture to prophecy, that although your meeting is in the very city of Westminster, although you are at this moment within a few yards of the House of Commons, I shall be told there that the Bill which you have been just now execrating meets with the general concurrence of the people. I think I have now authority to give a positive contradiction to that assertion.

Lord Mountmorris gave his hearty disapprobation of the Bill against which the company had voted a Petition, and expressed great indignation at the late attempt on his Majesty: he applauded the Address which the company had voted upon that subject. He censured very highly the conduct of Ministers in the prosecution of this war. Accused them of negligence with regard to the condition of the consequence of the high price of food. As there were Ministerial Reporters present, he hoped they would do him the honour to convey the substance of what he now said to their employers.

Lord Lauderdale proposed the thanks of the meeting to Mr. Fox, which was instantaneously voted by acclamation.

Mr. Fox, there are several copies of the Petition now lying at the King's Arms tavern for signature, and other places, of which notice will be given. And now I think we should adjourn. (Peace! Peace! Peace! was then pronounced by a vast number of voices.)

Mr. Fox proceeded. It has been suggested to me that there is another Petition now lying for signature which is intended to entrap the unwary. It is a Petition contrary

to this. How it is worded I do not know: indistinctly I believe; but it is in effect a *Petition for Slavery!* Beware of it. I hear a pretty general wish to address his Majesty and Parliament on the subject of Peace. All I can say is that I shall attend with pleasure and satisfaction any meeting for that purpose. From me you shall have every support I can give: you have a right to demand it of me. And now I propose that we should adjourn; and that our triumph may be complete, I trust you will all return peaceably to your homes.

The question of adjournment was then put, and agreed to with unanimity. We never witnessed a meeting even of 10 or 12,000 men, where order, regularity, and decorum were more perfectly observed. The effect of this conduct in a multitude that spread in every direction as far as the eye could reach, was truly impressive. When they held up their hands to signify their approbation, nothing could be more interesting than the sight. The reader may imagine the animating scene, when so many thousands of men stretched aloft their hands in solemn support of a Petition upon the issue of which everything sacred in life depended. The sky was rent with the acclamation of their consent, and having thus expressed their feelings upon every question as it was put, they returned again to the same attentive silence, which they maintained while every one of the noble and honourable persons who addressed them were speaking. If ever a meeting testified the heartfelt sense and conviction of the city of Westminster, it was the meeting of Nov. 16. Their conduct, like their numbers, was equal to the occasion which drew them forth. Many of them being eager to sign the Petition forthwith, they crowded round the copies which had been prepared, and several thousands signed the Petition on the spot. Others crowded around their upright and invaluable representative, Mr. Fox, and it was in vain for him to resist their importunities. He was hurried into a coach along with the Duke of Bedford, Mr. Sheridan, and another friend or two.

They then drew him through Pall Mall, St. James's-street, Piccadilly, Berkeley-square, and Hill-street, to Mr. Fox's house in South-street. The applause was extreme;

but there was not an insulting expression offered at any place or to any person. As soon as Mr. Fox got into his house, he addressed them from the window in a very few words, and requested them to be satisfied with the triumph of the day, that they had proved their love to the constitution, and their obedience to the laws, by the moderation, firmness, good order, and good sense with which they had conducted themselves. He desired them to continue to act upon those principles, to disperse immediately, and retire peaceably to their homes; for that the enemies of liberty and constitutional rights of the people could have no triumph but in the possibility of taking advantage of any indiscreet manifestation of their zeal.

In ten minutes the street was completely cleared, and all that numerous body of people retired with a tranquillity and good order that was hardly equalled, and never exceeded.

FINIS.



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